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EDITOR'S PICK

SC's Rosenwald schools, part of civil rights history, are pushed into spotlight

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Ralph James (left) and St. George Mayor Kevin Hart explore the back of the newly renovated St. George Rosenwald School on Oct. 24, 2022. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

BY GAVIN MCINTYRE GMCINTYRE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

ST. GEORGE — Not long ago, you couldn't stand inside without the floor giving way in places. The ceiling was falling in. Debris was everywhere. The building was enshrouded by a messy fringe of green, the decaying wooden frame obscured by overgrowth.

Today, the old Rosenwald School in this modest residential neighborhood just off U.S. Highway 78 is a shining beacon — restored and nearly ready for action.

It has been a 10-year-long heavy lift, but a determined team of preservationists, community leaders and supporters is seeing the project through, for this old school has profound historical meaning and plenty of future potential. It's part of a fascinating chapter in the civil rights struggle against injustice, and it's a symbol of transformation of both the physical and intellectual kind.

Ralph James, 76, has been leading the charge, chairing a seven-person board, working with legislators and civic leaders, coordinating with contractors, and sharing the history of this place with anyone who shows an interest in it.

Recounting the past comes easily to James. His brain seems to operate like a well-organized jewelry box whose myriad compartments each contain a valuable gem. He attended the school for first grade and part of second grade, so his memories are long and rooted in St. George. He and his classmates, though just young children at the time, cared deeply about their education at the school, James said.



HILTON HEAD

Advocates seek to protect Black burial grounds in Goose Creek, Hilton Head

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“Because it was a privilege, we took it very seriously,” he said. “Some walked 4 or 5 miles to get to school, then needed 30 minutes to warm their hands before they could work. The teachers were kind; they wanted the kids to succeed.”

The effort to preserve the St. George Rosenwald School was undertaken before local advocates knew of initiatives at the state and national levels to raise public awareness about this vast network of old schoolhouses across 15 Southern states that once provided essential learning environments to Black children.



The renovated St. George Rosenwald School soon could become a significant venue for residents of the town. Workers mostly have finished working on the schoolhouse, and on Oct. 24, 2022, were attending to the landscaping, parking area and a couple of secondary structures in need of repair. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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Another preservation effort in Hampton County got underway years ago, and others — in Columbia and Orangeburg, for example — already have succeeded in securing properties and restoring old buildings.

But now, a convergence is afoot. Leaders in the private and public sectors, and at various levels of government, are working in tandem to tell the story of a remarkable partnership between Julius Rosenwald, part-owner and president of Sears, and Booker T. Washington, the famed Black educator who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

The two men, a Jewish businessman from Chicago and an African American born into slavery in Virginia, created a school system for Black kids in the South during the period of legalized racism, discrimination and segregation. What they

accomplished fundamentally changed the trajectory of poor, rural African Americans, ensuring generational advancement when little else could do so at the time.

Now, Dorothy Canter is leading an effort to convince the federal government to create the Julius Rosenwald and Rosenwald Schools National Park. It would be a noncontiguous spread consisting of a headquarters and several satellite locations — Rosenwald schools.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit **Conservation Voters of South Carolina** is organizing a statewide campaign to secure a number of these schools in order to provide local communities with a basis for expanded environmental and cultural preservation efforts.

At the local level, preservationists in Hampton County, Orangeburg, St. George and elsewhere are collecting funds to restore Rosenwald schools, install historical markers, and develop materials that can propel this underappreciated aspect of civil rights history into clear view.



One of the classrooms in the St. George Rosenwald School, pictured on Oct. 24, 2022, has been restored to its original condition. It can be used as a meeting room. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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‘Jewel of our community’

The St. George project got its start about 10 years ago. Then-Mayor Ann Johnston wanted to do something to bring the community together. State Sen. John Matthews found \$65,000 in rural development funding to help the community purchase the property. State Rep. Patsy Knight joined the effort. And James assumed the role of project manager.

Built in 1925, the school was used until 1954. The Rosenwald Fund initially provided \$1,500, the Black community came up with \$2,000, and the local government chipped in \$4,800 drawn from tax revenue. During that period, the six-teacher school was surrounded by small businesses — a barbershop, soda shop, pool hall, movie theater, grocery store and candy store.

In the mid-1950s, Benjamin Wamer took ownership of the property. He was a prominent mortician, entrepreneur and civic leader who converted the school into a community center, installing a swimming pool, arranging for dances in the auditorium, and allowing vendors to sell concessions.

By the late 1960s, the building was no longer used for events and gatherings. It became a storage facility and deteriorated.



In Dorchester County, workers constructed huge sheds to enclose the deteriorating St. George Rosenwald School, helping it dry out so renovation work could proceed.

File/Brad Nettles/Staff

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The original school configuration included the large main building, an outhouse and a small structure meant for vocational training. Now that the schoolhouse restoration is mostly finished, the plan is to transform the outhouse into public bathrooms and the vocational classroom into an exhibit space featuring information about domestic life in the Black community during Jim Crow, James said.

An old train carriage is to be installed near the parking lot. It will be used as a café that doubles as a memorial to the late school teacher Ezekiel L. Gadson, a poet, singer and disciplinarian who worked as a railway porter before becoming an educator.

The main building, which includes two classrooms restored to their original condition, replete with potbelly stoves, will become part event space and performance venue and part museum or exhibit hall.

James said his team hopes the St. George Rosenwald School can become part of the National Park Service's African American Civil Rights Network and, eventually, part of a new Rosenwald Schools National Park.

It's exciting to see "a jewel of our community in that area come back to life," James said.



NEWS

USC Center for Civil Rights History and Research gets big National Park Service grant

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Meanwhile in Hampton County, Charlie Grant has spearheaded an effort to install historical markers at four Rosenwald school sites, and he is now working to restore the only one of the school buildings still standing.

Grant, pastor of Wilkerson Missionary Baptist Church in Early Branch, said it's all part of a larger mission to develop a regional network of historic Rosenwald schools, and to hold that up as an example to others.

"A lot of our history has been overlooked and undervalued and forgotten," he said. "I know that in the Black community, our schools were church schools, 'colored schools,' Rosenwald schools, equalization schools (and) integration schools." The earliest of these often were run by, or supported financially by, churches, he noted. His own church once sponsored the Hicksville Colored School.

The St. George Rosenwald School, originally built in 1925, is undergoing renovations that will transform the structure into a multi-purpose community center.

The first of Hampton County's Rosenwald schools was built in Gifford in 1920. It's the only one left. Grant succeeded in getting it added to the National Registry of Historic Places, and now is raising money to pay for its restoration.

The Rosenwald schools in Brunson and Estill were built in 1925, and the school in Yemassee went up in 1929. Today, only the markers recall what happened at these sites.

"We have been trying to educate the community," Grant said. "Some didn't realize national significance of these schools."



MCKENZIE-BEACH

Can a historic Black beach in Georgetown County be revitalized?

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Not just schools

About 5,000 Rosenwald schools were built in 15 states between 1913 and 1932. In South Carolina, nearly 500 modest buildings served Black students thanks to the Progressive Era project. Of those, perhaps 40 that survived the intervening century have been inventoried. Other structures probably survive but were converted into homes or businesses. Most have been lost.

Valinda Littlefield, interim director of the Institute for Study of the Reconstruction Era at the University of South Carolina Beaufort, said the partnership between Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald was based on mutual respect and admiration. Rosenwald had read Washington's book "Up from Slavery" and bought into the famed educator's concept of creating a network of community schools in rural areas of the Jim Crow South.

A formula was devised whereby Rosenwald would pitch in a portion of the total amount of money needed, the Black community in the area would come up with another portion, and local government would add its share of public funding.

The buildings were designed to emphasize equity, to be easily replicated and to share certain features, such as nine-pane sliding windows and an orientation that took advantage of natural light. None had plumbing or heating, so students and teachers relied on outhouses and classroom stoves.

Civic-minded African Americans would donate land, labor and teaching prowess. Others would feed the children. Some would organize after-school programs. The buildings often were used as gathering places where events could be presented or meetings held. In this way, the schools became essential assets of the communities they served, Littlefield said.



NEWS

The Black church is an essential community pillar that has been a target over the centuries

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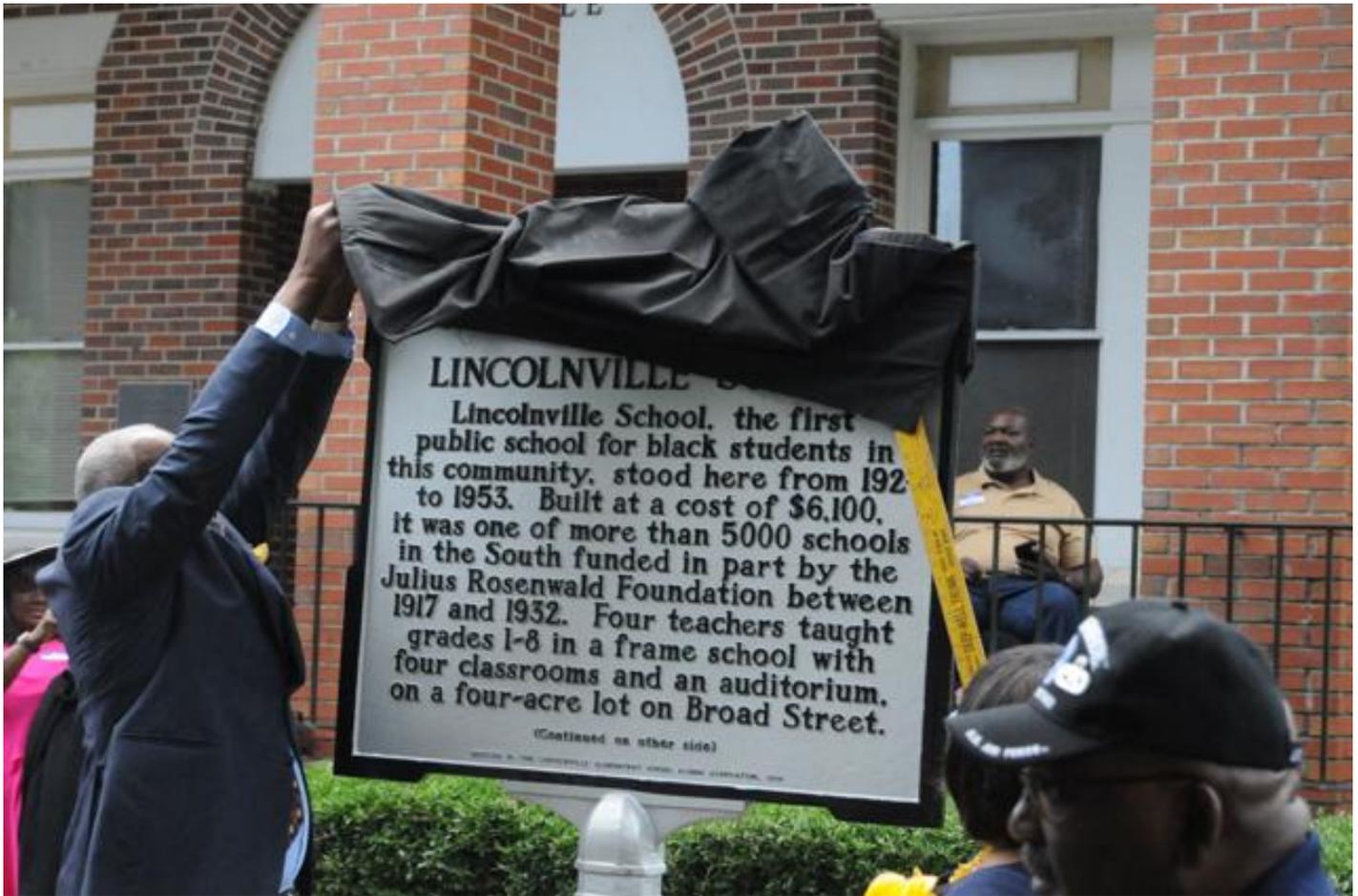
They were meant originally to provide vocational training, but students also learned Latin and math and writing, and some of the lessons were made available to residents.

“The community understood,” she said. “These are people clamoring for access to quality education.”

Some of the schools became miniature economic engines, where people learned to build furniture, do ironwork, cook and operate a cannery. In this way it helped isolated Black communities become self-sufficient, Littlefield said.

Washington died in 1915 only a few years after he and Rosenwald forged their partnership. In that brief time, they arranged for six schools to be constructed in rural parts of Alabama. It was a pilot program of sorts that proved successful, so Rosenwald established the Rosenwald Fund in 1917 to keep the program going.

Instructors at the Tuskegee Institute developed the architectural designs. The fund distributed more than \$4 million over 25 years, which was used to build schools, teacher housing, and related shops extending from Maryland to Texas.



Lincolnville Elementary School alumni unveil a historical marker in 2019 recalling the history of the school, which was constructed in 1923, thanks to the Rosenwald Fund. File/Caleb McCraw/Journal Scene

FILE/CALEB MCCRAW/JOURNAL SCENE

Brad Sauls, a program supervisor at the [S.C. Historic Preservation Office](#), said he has assisted in efforts over the years to identify the state's many Rosenwald schools. His office, working with local leaders, has listed 12 in the National Register of Historic Places. He has also facilitated the installment of historical markers.

“It could be there are others that we haven’t stumbled upon yet,” Sauls said.

“Sometimes these things are hiding in plain sight.” They might be located in isolated areas, restored and reused in some way.

The Rosenwald schools often replaced older structures that were little more than shacks, he said. The improved quality of the schoolhouse was an effort during segregation to address the enormous disparities in education between Black and White people.

Conservation benefits

Among the 5,000 or so Rosenwald buildings were a number of “teacherages” — homes for instructors. The Great Branch Rosenwald Teacherage in Orangeburg was established in 1918 at a cost of \$2,650. The three-bedroom boarding house sat adjacent to a school built in 1922 and later set ablaze by arsonists.

St. George Rosenwald School renovation project

A quick visual overview of the renovation of the St. George Rosenwald School, May 2016 through March 2021. The project has been closely followed by Charleston-based doctor and amateur photographer Alan Nussbaum, who granted The Post and Courier permission to publish these images.



Former St. George Mayor Ann Johnston helped get the project started in 2016.

ALAN NUSSBAUM/PROVIDED

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By the early 1950s, newer facilities replaced the old schoolhouse, though the property remained part of the Edisto District. In May 1961, it was deeded to the Great Branch Community Center and used as a family home for a while. Eventually, though, it was abandoned and fell into disrepair.

In 2006, the restoration project got underway, thanks to a \$25,000 state grant and donations from alumni and others. Three years later it opened to the public. Last month, historians, civic leaders and preservationists celebrated the 13th anniversary of its restoration.

Similar efforts were made in other parts of South Carolina, including Columbia, where the Pine Grove Rosenwald School is located. That two-room schoolhouse was built in 1923, closed in 1953, used as a community center in the 1960s, and restored in 2006.

It was the site of a daylong seminar about the history of the Rosenwald project organized last month by the Conservation Voters of South Carolina, which hopes to combine environmental and cultural preservation throughout the state.



FAITH AND VALUES

A Jewish museum in the Italian town of Ferrara that insists on reckoning with history

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

“On some level there was a recognition that conservation efforts often benefit certain portions of the population, namely rich White landowners to be frank, and that often the benefits aren’t reaching some of our underserved rural, Black, poor communities, and other minorities,” project manager Zach Bjur said. “So we started looking at ways, along with other conservation organizations across the country, that we can still achieve our goals — conservation benefits (habitat protection, flooding mitigation, access to green space) — while also getting those benefits to communities that don’t normally see them.”

Securing Rosenwald schools in rural communities is the first step in what could become an expanding initiative to protect both physical and cultural assets, which of course are inseparable anyway, Bjur said.

Dawn Dawson-House, executive director of the [WeGOJA Foundation](#), said her organization, which is devoted to the preservation of historic sites and properties in South Carolina, is helping to identify Rosenwald schools on behalf of the state’s Department of Archives and History and collaborators including the Conservation Voters and the Rosenwald National Park Campaign.



History kept Black children out of the water in SC. Program returns to teach them to swim.

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

A national park?

Dorothy Canter is spearheading that campaign. She worked 15 years at the Environmental Protection Agency, and has been a longtime national park enthusiast, she said. By 2015, she and her husband had visited most of them. In September that year, they went to see a feature documentary called “Rosenwald” by filmmaker Aviva Kempner.

“We were both blown away,” Canter said. They knew nothing about the Chicago businessman whose philanthropy was motivated by the Jewish concept of “*tzedakah*,” which is Hebrew for righteousness, justice and fairness. As the credits were rolling, Canter thought: “There needs to be a national park to honor Rosenwald and the Rosenwald schools.” It would be the first to pay tribute to an American Jew, even as it expanded awareness of civil rights history.

It wouldn't be the first noncontiguous federal park. The [Manhattan Project National Historic Park](#) includes sites in Tennessee, Washington state and New Mexico. The [Reconstruction Era National Historic Park](#) includes four Beaufort-area sites, and an extended network of historic places. The National Park Service's [African American Civil Rights Network](#) includes nearly 30 sites scattered across the country. And the [National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom](#) has more than 700 locations in 39 states, plus Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Canter said she relies on a small piece of legislation that aids her efforts. In January 2021, Congress directed the National Park Service to conduct a special resource study of Rosenwald school sites.

That's it, though. There's no significant funding yet, only determination on Canter's part, and enthusiasm among potential partners throughout the South.

Ultimately, she said, a national park would likely include a Chicago headquarters and perhaps a half-dozen schools. Maybe one of them will be in South Carolina.



Ralph James stands in the assembly area and auditorium of the newly renovated St. George Rosenwald School on Oct. 24, 2022. James has spearheaded the project. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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In St. George, the school is nearly ready for use. Crews still are working outside on the landscaping, parking area and two external structures. The HVAC system needs to be enclosed, the drainage ponds enlarged a little.

In the courtyard between the building's two wings, students once played basketball. Lee Behling, superintendent of the renovation project, has created landscaping there to resemble a court. He also reclaimed colorful wooden slats from the junk pile and installed them in the auditorium. It was a creative decision that imbues the space with a combination of nostalgia and hope.

“This place touched so many different people,” James said.

And it will do so again.

For here, on this stage, soon will be members of the community, performers, special guests and civic leaders looking into the faces of those who have gathered. Soon this place will cease to be merely a monument to history; it will become an active venue, a destination, a symbol of the future.

Soon, the St. George Rosenwald School will come alive.

Contact **Adam Parker** at aparker@postandcourier.com.

MORE INFORMATION

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Nonprofit gets \$750K to bolster efforts to preserve Black history in SC

Hutchinson House on Edisto Island now in final phase of restoration

ADAM PARKER

PHOTOGRAPHER

Adam Parker has covered many beats and topics for The Post and Courier, including race and history, religion, and the arts. He is the author of “Outside Agitator: The Civil Rights Struggle of Cleveland Sellers Jr.,” published by Hub City Press.